

WEST BERKSHIRE ADOPTION SERVICE

HALF YEARLY REPORT APRIL 2012 TO SEPTEMBER 30

2012

Introduction

West Berkshire Council seeks to promote the upbringing of children within their birth families in accordance with the spirit and provisions of the Children Act 1989. If it has been decided following a thorough assessment and intervention by the court that the child(ren) are unable to remain in the birth family then adoption is considered as one of a range of ways of achieving permanence for the child(ren).

The Adoption Service recruits adoptive families for children and works to appropriately match children needing adoptive placements with approved adopters. The needs of the children are the agency's paramount consideration.

The priorities of the Adoption Service are:

- To achieve the placement of children being looked after by West Berkshire Council, for whom adoption is part of their care plan, with appropriate approved adopters (whether approved by West Berkshire or another Adoption Agency), matched according to the children's specific needs and circumstances and within appropriate timescales.
- To recruit prospective adopters and prepare and assess adoptive applicants applying to the Service who will meet the placement needs of the children waiting for families both locally and nationally.
- To provide a Post Adoption Support service where appropriate. This will include the counselling of adopted adults and support where appropriate to birth parents and others affected by adoption. (Adoption and Children Act 2002)

All members of the Family Placement Team work across both the Adoption and the Fostering Services. The full establishment of the Family Placement Team is:

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| 1 | Team Manager |
| 2 | Assistant Team Managers |
| 1 | Post-adoption Support Specialist Social Worker |
| 8.5 FTE | Family Placement Social Workers |
| 3.62 FTE | Family Support Workers |
| 1 | Publicity and Recruitment Worker |
| 4.09 FTE | Support Services Staff |

The Family Placement Team remained stable until 31st August when Assistant Team Managers Fiona Crute left the team and council to progress her career. June Kemp continuing in the role of Team Manager and Keith Langley as Assistant Team Manager, we currently have one vacant post for Assistant Team Manager. Mary Heslin continues in the role of Post Adoption Support Worker and Ananda Bodenstein in the role of Family Finder for children for whom the care plan is adoption. In the proceeding six months the team will be going through a period of change as we have one social worker going on maternity leave and one going on adoption leave. We also have two social worker who will be off work for a significant

period due to health issues. This will undoubtedly have an impact on the team and we are considering how these gaps can be met

Currently all social work staff within the Family Placement Team who undertake adoption work hold a professional social work qualification, are registered with the HCPC, have a good understanding of adoption issues and regularly attend additional training events to maintain and extend their knowledge base.

The service was inspected in February 2011 when it was rated as “outstanding”.

A copy of the inspection report is available on the West Berkshire website as well as the OFSTED website. As a result the adoption service has been granted permission to use the “outstanding” logo on its literature, advertising etc.

Summary of West Berkshire Activity between 01/04/2012 and 31/09/2012

Over the last six months:

- 4 children have been to panel for best interests
- 2 children have been matched with adopters
- 4 adopters have been approved
- 4 adoption orders have been granted on West Berkshire children
- No step family adoption orders were granted in the last six months, we currently have 5 in assess with 6 families waiting for assessment.
- 4 children from other local authorities have been placed with West Berkshire approved adopters
- 4 adoption orders have been granted on children placed from other local authorities with Berkshire adopters
- No Special Guardianship Orders were granted
- 1 adoption disrupted took place regard two children placed with West Berkshire adopters

In total 21 children have had adoption considered as part of their care planning, (some have been concurrent planning as part of the court care process) but not all of these children have or will be placed for adoption. Out of the 21 children four adoption orders were granted. Four children are placed waiting for an adoption order, 5 children are waiting to be placed and three children have been match and are waiting introductions, two children were granted Special Guardianship Orders and three children are being considered for reunification home.

As part of the Berkshire Consortium rolling programme we completed 1 adoption information day and 1 adoption preparation group between June 2012 to the July 2012.

We are currently assessing 7 families for adoption who will be presented to adoption panel for approval; we have one adoption assessment on hold at the request of the adopters. There are a further 8 families who are at different stages of attending information and preparation training.

The Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service

The West Berkshire Adoption Service is part of a consortium arrangement between the six Berkshire unitary authorities who jointly fund the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service (BAAS). This was established in 1998 and operates from offices in Windsor.

The BAAS performs the following tasks on behalf of the 6 Berkshire authorities:-

- Manages and administers the Berkshire adoption panel – that includes West Berkshire, Reading, Wokingham, Slough, Bracknell, Windsor and Maidenhead
- Recruits & trains adoption panel members
- Provides professional and administrative support for the adoption panels
- Manages the Berkshire Letter Box service between adoptive families and birth families
- Manages direct contact arrangements between adoptive families and birth families
- Provides specialist training on adoption issues and advice and assistance on complex adoption matters for staff in the six unitary authorities
- Provides specialist counselling for adults seeking access to birth records
- Administers, and provides a social work service to the closed looked after children's records and adoption records
- Provides independent support for birth family members when the plan for children is adoption
- Funds and provides support to specific adoption initiatives

The consortium arrangement enables adoptive placements to be made available at reduced cost to member agencies and also enhances opportunities for joint training, adoption support and for developing and improving practice.

In addition to the Adoption Panel activity the following resources have been available to the unitary authorities via the consortium:-

- Training for staff, panel members, adopters and their families
- Post-adoption support forum
- The Berkshire adoption exchange (this enables adopters to meet social workers and discuss children needing placement)
- Life appreciation days and disruption meetings
- The birth parent service
- The indirect contact service (Letterbox Exchange)
- The direct contact service
- Adoption and birth records workshops
- Birth mothers' group
- Birth fathers' group (this is a new development)
- Adoptive fathers' group
- Adopters' newsletter
- Adoption support handbook for workers
- Adopted children's group
- Membership of Adoption UK
- Adopters' conference
- Storage of and access to children's records

A detailed overview of the Berkshire Adoption Advisory Service and its activities can be found in the BAAS Annual report for 2010-2011 which will be published shortly.

Inter-country Adoption Arrangements

West Berkshire has a contract with a local voluntary agency PACT (Parents and Children Together) for that agency to provide an adoption service for those seeking to adopt from overseas. This service is currently renewed on an annual basis. PACT provides prospective inter country adopters with information about the overseas adoption process, including an enquiry service so that prospective adopters can make an informed decision as to whether inter country adoption is appropriate for them. In the past six months PACT has received 365 enquiries, 70 initial interviews were completed, 52 applications received and 27 adopters approved, with 22 placements made. There are currently 8 approved adopters waiting for inter country adoption placements. PACT will then assess prospective adopters, who will be presented to the PACT adoption panel for consideration of their application. Changes in the reporting of welfare visits have been made the local authority continue to make the welfare visits but the report is the responsibility of PACT. All inter-country adoptions in West Berkshire have now been completed.

Post-adoption Support Services

During the past year there has been a focus on the continued development of post-adoption services for adoptive parents living in West Berkshire, their children and relatives.

Post adoption services also include the counselling of adopted adults and intermediary services for both adopted adults and birth family members and requests for these services have continued to increase significantly following the Adoption and Children Act 2002. This service continues to provide support to a very wide and varied population and includes clients who are in their 60s and 70s.

Post Adoption services continue to offer counselling, advice and information, family fun days, training and mediation regarding contact issues. More direct services such as therapeutic support and support with education is also available. The post adoption team may "signpost" to other specialist services, eg CAMHS, Occupational Therapy, including a consultation service with the Berkshire Adopted Children Counselling Service through Bracknell and Wokingham Local Authority and Chinene Kimber-Bidlot, behavioural specialist, for social workers and carers, which can aid assessment and direct work with children and their carers.

Family fun days facilitate the relationship between professionals and carers and between the carers and can lead to carers arranging their own social events and giving informal support to each other. Activities for carers and their children generally occur outside of office hours to encourage attendance. A toddlers' group was introduced last year and the organisation of this has been taken over by the carers themselves. Attendance at this group is varied but will continue to run as it provides support to new adopters and enables sharing of experiences.

There are 172 families including Special Guardians on the post adoption database receiving information about events. Of these families approximately 6 will at any time

be receiving a post adoption support service involving social work support, sometimes at quite a high level to prevent adoption breakdown. The authority works with adoptive families to support placements and whilst this may on occasions require individual work the authority's ethos is to work with the family as a whole. We have 20 individuals who are receiving birth records counselling or relevant information.

Adoption allowances are being paid in respect of 20 children.

Special Guardianship

The adoption service is involved in the preparation of reports for court in Special Guardianship applications along with the locality social workers and in the provision of special guardian support services once the order has been granted. The support of Special Guardians is similar to that of adopters. No Special Guardianship orders were completed in the last six months. The adoption agency is supporting nine Special Guardianship arrangements. We currently have three Special Guardianship assessments in progress involving four children one of which is a sibling pair.

In-family adoptions

During the past year 4 in-family adoption assessments have been completed and 2 progressed to adoption orders being granted. This is an area which relates primarily to the preparation of reports to court following an application to adopt a specific child who is already living within a family who wish to change their legal status in order to acquire parental responsibility for the child. The child is not 'looked after'.

Due to competing priorities this work is managed via a "waiting list". There are currently 2 in family adoption assessments being undertaken and 3 are on the waiting list for allocation. The waiting list is regularly reviewed by the management team and assessments are allocated when a social worker becomes available.

Complaints

2 complaints were received from the same prospective adopters; the couple withdrew their initial complaint whilst they had access to their old records, following this they made a new complaint regarding the decision not to take their adoption enquiry forward. The complaint was not up held but the couple were upset as it was a sensitive issue and this was acknowledged.

Summary of the six months

We are currently family finding for nine children between the ages of 0 to 6 years of age. All of these children have had had a difficult start in life having experienced abuse and neglect, or the effects of parental drug misuse while in the womb.

Enquiries from potential adopters in the West Berkshire area remains constant, however having vacancies within the team will have an impact on the time it takes to progress adoption applications within the recommended time scales. In the past six months we have approved four adoptive households and are hoping to approve a further eight households within the next six months.

Timescales within adoption are generally being adhered to and most children are being placed within six months of the Best Interest decision. Where they are not this is due to the specific needs of the children and/or legal complications.

Special Guardianship is continuing to be considered as a viable alternative option to children remaining in care.

PACT is continuing to provide the Berkshire Adoption Consortium Consultation Service. This service is available to adoptive families across Berkshire. The aim of the service is to provide consultation to parents experiencing difficulties within their adoptive family. The project has been developed jointly between Berkshire Adoption Consortium members and Parents And Children Together, PACT.

We have continued to make good use of staff skills within the team who are trained in Theraplay, a technique that is designed to help adopters to promote relationships with their children and which includes an assessment of the relationship through play. Elements of this technique may be used with other families, along with the education of adopters about the impact of trauma upon children and their resulting brain development – and, hence, their behaviour. This is in line with the model advocated by Margot Sunderland. The developmental dyadic therapy approach, as pioneered by Dan Hughes, is used in working with children and helping carers to parent in a more therapeutic way.

The above approach has often had to be used as a crisis management strategy in the last year. The challenge for the post adoption team in the coming year is to embed this approach – and at an earlier stage - so that it might become a preventative model, thus falling in line with the model of working currently being promoted by Professor Munro.

Challenges of the year ahead

The year ahead is likely to be a challenging one; as indicated above there are likely to be changes as a result of the Government's reform of adoption services. 'An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay' has already been published and, as is indicated in the title, this is aimed at reducing the time that it takes for children to move into their adoptive placements as well as reducing the time that it takes to assess prospective adopters. In September The Department of Education launched a consultation on the range of adoption and fostering proposals. For adoption they propose a new, two stage approval process for prospective adopters: fast track procedures for approval of foster carers and previous adopters, changes aimed to increase the use made by adoption agencies of the Adoption Register and changes to regulations to make it easier for prospective adopters to be approved as temporary foster carers.

The government has new indicators designed to measure the overall experience of a child who is adopted, to identify the proportion of children who wait longer for adoption than they should and to test the speed of family finding. The government is also likely to set targets for assessing prospective adoptive parents. The adoption score card came into force in March 2012 with three key indicators: the time children spend in care before being placed for adoption, the time from placement order to match and the percentage of children who wait less than twelve months between entering care and moving to their adoptive family. West Berkshire Adoption Team is above the national threshold in all areas.

In February 2012 the Department of Health published amendments to the Statutory Guidance to reflect the changes to be implemented by the Adoption Agencies (Panel and Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2012 which came into force on 1 September. The statutory guidance explains the content of the different sets of regulations made under the Adoption and Children Act 2002, and the duties and responsibilities that they place on adoption agencies. Children who are subject to care proceeding will no longer be required to go to adoption panel for a best interest decision. From 1 September the agency will refer a child's case direct to the adoption panel for a recommendation only in certain circumstances. All other cases will be referred directly to the agency decision maker for a decision.

As a team we would whole heartedly welcome the improvement of experience of both adopted children and prospective adopters, however, achieving this is a complex issue and not solely the responsibility of Children's Services as often delays for children can occur during the court process. With respect to recruiting and assessing adopters, it is vital that the needs of children are kept paramount and that the right placement is found for the child. This means that we need to attract the right people to come forward to adopt, who have the skills and willingness to care for children who may have complex needs and where their future development is uncertain.

The adoption service will work closely with the other unitary authorities within Berkshire and BAAS to implement the initiatives that come out of the Government review.

June Kemp
Team Manager

30th October 2012